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ABSTRACT

This report presents the steps and actions that public libraries may take to begin to meet the needs for literacy training in their individual communities. Outlined are three major approaches that libraries can consider when addressing the literacy needs of their communities: (1) initiating a literacy program; (2) cooperating with an existing literacy program; or (3) establishing resource centers for literacy training and materials. An overview of existing literacy activity in Ohio is also provided, as well as an outline of practical actions that libraries may want to undertake in addressing their communities' literacy needs, and suggestions for working through anticipated problems. For further assistance, a selected bibliography of 10 references is presented. A checklist for implementing a new service and a list of six sources for literacy information are appended. (CGD)

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The Public Library and Literacy: A Community Based Approach

Written by: Thomas Szudy
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The Public Library and Literacy: A Community Based Approach

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Unread Valentines

After the national focus on the PLUS (Project Literacy United States) campaign, there is a recognition of the need to improve the literacy skills of millions of people in the United States. Nationally, the number of adults who cannot read has been estimated to be between 23 and 65 million. In Ohio, nearly 1.5 million adults are illiterate. Whether the actual number is closer to the lower or higher estimate is not as important as the fact that any person who cannot read is a lost potential to himself and his community. As one of the slogans of the Literacy Volunteers of America suggests, "there is nothing as sad as an unread valentine."

This publication is not an exhaustive treatment of adult illiteracy in the United States. Most people are now aware that the problem needs to be addressed. Rather, the steps and actions that public libraries may take to begin to meet the needs for literacy training in their individual communities will be presented.

Experience has shown Ohio libraries may take three major approaches to address the literacy needs of their communities. Libraries may:

I. Initiate a literacy program,

II. Cooperate with an existing literacy program,

III. Establish resource centers for literacy training and materials.

It is important to look at each of these methods and illustrate the value of focusing activities to the specific need. This publication will also present an overview of some existing literacy activity in Ohio.

Finally, along with practical actions that libraries will want to undertake, this publication will introduce suggestions for working through anticipated problems and will provide a selected bibliography for further assistance.

I. Initiate a Literacy Program

The first method a library may take to become involved in literacy is to set up a literacy program for the community. The following outline will serve as a guideline:

A. Examine the Community

1. Where are the problem areas?
2. Who is doing what?
3. What should the library do?

B. Funding

1. Seek federal funds.
2. Seek local and private funding.
3. Develop service for funding.

C. Marshal the Community

1. Select interested people from the community.
2. Work with local social services organizations.
3. Coordinate and plan activities.

D. Select the Program

1. Contact local or regional literacy centers.
2. Meet with students and tutors.
3. Develop a timetable for implementation.

E. Implement the Program

1. Start tutor training.
2. Match tutors with students.
3. Train new tutors to match with new students.

F. Review and Evaluate

1. Monitor progress of tutors and trainers.
2. Correct any problem in matching.
3. Meet with students and tutors.

A. Examine the Community

The first step to be taken in initiating a literacy program is to examine the community. The librarian will need to know where the problem areas for literacy are in the community. This examination will include making contact with the existing literacy coalitions to see what their programs are doing. The librarian must then decide what the appropriate role is for the library and how best to work with existing literacy organizations.

B. Funding

For most programs the key to success is funding. A program needs to have a source of income to purchase materials, provide office space, and administer the program. A librarian will need to keep in mind how the program will be continued and funded in the future.

The major source of incentive funding for new public library projects is the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). This federal program began in 1956 as the Library Services Act and was later amended to include library construction. There are currently six titles to LSCA of which two concern literacy funding: Titles I and VI.

Under Title I libraries apply to the State Library which reviews the grant applications and recommends funding to the State Library Board. Title VI of LSCA is handled directly through the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C.

Generally, LSCA funding is useful for seed money to get a program started and may be continued for a second and third year with an increasing local match.

Other sources of funding include foundation grants. There are currently about 25,000 foundations in the United States. Each foundation has separate criteria for funding which means that foundations must receive individual applications. Local foundations are often very helpful for local projects. A local foundation may be more closely tuned to the needs of the community.

It is important that the library demonstrate that it has a good program which is worth funding. The recognition that a library literacy program is making a substantial contribution to the community is one of the best ways to generate support and continued funding. Before applying for a foundation grant, a library may wish to consult the nearest foundation center for guidance.

C. Marshal the Community

In order to begin a local community effort to address literacy it is important to gather together those individuals in the community with

an interest and willingness to meet the problem. These individuals can be very helpful in tapping the resources of the community for funding and human resources.

Local social service organizations such as churches, United Way, Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, Jaycees, and others encourage their members to volunteer for community activities. With a core group of individuals from the community, with varied interests and backgrounds, the library is ready to begin its program.

The library needs to establish a list of goals, objectives, and activities for its literacy program. If the goal of the library is to establish a literacy program for its service area then the literacy committee needs to establish a set of objectives to measure progress. Finally, the literacy committee needs to develop a plan of action to carry out its objectives. At this point, it needs to be clear in the minds of the committee what the objectives are and how to accomplish them.

D. Select the Program

Once the library has decided to start a literacy program and has established a literacy committee it will then need to decide on the type of tutoring technique most appropriate for the library.

Currently, there are two major literacy organizations in the United States: Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America. Laubach Literacy Action is the older of the two and was developed by a Christian missionary, Dr. Frank Laubach. The Laubach method takes the student through four skill books which are structured and based on a phonetic system. Literacy Volunteers of America uses a less structured format and draws heavily on the life experiences of the student.

The librarian who is beginning a literacy program does not necessarily need to choose one program over the other. The librarian can choose to incorporate elements of both programs into the project. The library program that uses the Literacy Volunteers of America techniques may wish to teach phonetics after the student has worked through his life experience vocabulary and sight words. The main point is that both systems are useful in teaching someone to read and may need to be tailored to the individual student.

In most large cities in Ohio there are local literacy centers which are linked to the national center in Syracuse. In several rural areas of the state, it may be necessary to contact the nearest center in the county. In some cases it may be that the nearest literacy center is the local Adult Basic Education center. It is important that the library contact these centers for advice on getting started, finding students and tutors, and

operational guidance. The goal is not to start from scratch but to build on existing community strengths.

Once the library has established the committee and contacted the local literacy center it should begin to recruit its students and tutors. Libraries may use various recruitment techniques including:

- Newspaper ads
- Posters
- Radio-TV ads
- Word of mouth
- Community organizations

The library program will then need to decide on its hours of operation.

E. Implement the Program

Tutors can receive their training through a local affiliate of Laubach or Literacy Volunteers of America. If this is not possible for reasons of transportation or distance it is possible to have a certified tutor trainer conduct the training at the library.

Students and tutors should be matched on the basis of convenience to transportation, personality, and ability to work together. An occasional mismatch of student and tutor is to be expected.

Again, it is always possible that a student and tutor may not be compatible with each other. The proper approach to take is to rematch the student with another tutor more suited to that person. The librarian will want to keep meeting with students and tutors on a regular basis. This contact should be often enough to address any problems that may occur and also to allow for anticipated future concerns.

A library literacy program is to be considered an integral part of the library's outreach to the community. As the community changes and seeks new solutions to problems, so must the library. The program will need to be changed, amended, reworked, and continually updated to meet the challenges of the times.

As one set of students and tutors begin to work together, the literacy center should be training new tutors. Eventually, a core of tutors will be in place and new tutors recruited as old tutors leave or change locations.

F. Review and Evaluate the Program

The library literacy center needs to monitor the progress of students and tutors. The center will need to maintain files on its students and tutors and their progress. While record keeping is important, it should not become the focus of the center at the expense of the student.

II. Cooperate with an Existing Literacy Program

The second major approach that a library may want to take is to cooperate with an existing literacy coalition or agency. As stated previously, most major cities have an existing literacy program or are in the process of putting one together. A library may wish to join forces with an existing literacy coalition to build upon its strengths. Another way for the library to become involved in literacy is to make referrals and publicize the activities of the local literacy center in the community.

Methods of Cooperation with Literacy Organizations

1. Attend meetings of the Board of Trustees of local literacy groups.
2. Invite new readers from literacy centers to library programs.
3. Advertise the activities of the local literacy center in promotional materials of the library.
4. Offer the facilities of the library, such as the use of the meeting room and audio visual equipment, to the literacy center.
5. Schedule visits for the staff of the library to the local literacy center.
6. Allow staff to receive literacy training to become tutors on library time.
7. Explore joint funding ideas with literacy centers.
8. Expand the library's collection of adult new reader materials.
9. Encourage new readers to utilize all the services of the library.
10. Investigate methods of working together with local literacy centers to promote mutual goals and programs in the community.

The library serves as a communicator and point of reference for the activities of the community which includes literacy. The Medina County District Library is one example of a library that has worked successfully to cooperate with an existing literacy coalition.

An Example: The Medina County Literacy Coalition

The Medina County District Library has cooperated with an existing literacy center to build on its strengths. The Medina County District Library received an LSCA grant through The State Library of Ohio to expand the Medina County Literacy Coalition. The programs of the project included outreach, establishment of a book club for adult new readers, resource development, and staff education. The existing Literacy Coalition which has consisted of the Public Library, the Adult Basic Education Program of the County Vocational Center, and Project LEARN, the local Laubach new reader program, has been expanded.

The Medina County Library through its LSCA funding hired two people from the Joint Vocational Center and the Laubach Center to coordinate the project. The library uses a building next to the library for its literacy office. The Medina grant has several goals for the individual student as well as the community.

The individual and community-based goals are:

For Individuals

- *To have an improved ability to function in daily life*
- *To have opportunities to improve literacy skills*
- *To improve motivation and self-confidence*
- *To complete education to the high school level and beyond*
- *To have access to support services.*

For the Community

- *To have a centralized focus for the delivery of literacy services*
- *To have access to a specialist in family reading*
- *To see a reduction in levels of unemployment, crime, welfare and other social concerns which are attributed to illiteracy.*

The activities of the Medina County District Library literacy project include:

- *Conducting monthly meetings of the Medina County Literacy Coalition*
- *Recruitment of new members*
- *Dissemination of outreach materials*
- *Book clubs for low-level readers*
- *Seminars on the use of the library*
- *Film sessions on reading to children*
- *Speaker on literacy for the community*
- *Expansion of the library new reader collection*
- *Education and training experience for volunteers and paid staff.*

III. The Library as a Resource Center

The third method that librarians may use to either begin involvement in literacy or to supplement the other two methods is to set up a literacy resource center at the library.

Most library directors are now realizing that the public library is a natural ally in the fight against illiteracy. The first step that many libraries are taking is to purchase materials appropriate to adults just beginning to learn to read. The collection of new reader materials can either be placed in a separate area or integrated into the collection. There are advocates for both positions of where to place literacy collections. Some librarians have expressed the belief that to place a new reader collection in a separate area will tend to isolate the student from the mainstream of the community. Other librarians feel that the best approach is to have the literacy center in its own place for better access for the student. In the end, the decision as to where the collection should be placed is up to each individual library director. The most critical element needs to remain the access of the collection to the new reader in an environment in which the student will feel welcome in the library.

Along with establishing a collection of new reader materials, librarians may also undertake other activities to establish a resource center. The following serves as a guideline for types of items to be part of a library literacy resource center:

- New reader materials/Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America
- Literacy videotapes
- Literacy computer software
- Listening station (an area where students can listen to language tapes and recordings)
- Television monitor
- Video recorder
- Meeting room or area for group interaction

Other features may be included in a library resource center as the librarian may see the need. The most important feature is that the resource center meet the needs of the new reader.

Getting Started

Librarians may wish to start with building a collection of new reader materials and gradually assemble a literacy resource center. As the

resource center becomes a part of the library, it will then be possible to work with local literacy centers on cooperative projects. Finally, as the library staff becomes more oriented toward literacy, it may then want to start a library based literacy program of its own.

Conclusion

The State Library of Ohio has taken a leadership role in the promotion of literacy in Ohio. The State Library has conducted workshops on libraries and literacy and has worked with public libraries in Ohio to use LSCA funds to promote literacy projects. Librarians may wish to contact the State Library for consultant information.

There are many reasons for beginning a literacy project in a library. A library needs to be an integral part of the community. As the community moves forward in time it brings along with it the problems and challenges to its local library. The library often serves as the keystone agency for information in the community. Therefore, the library needs to become the catalyst for helping to improve the opportunities for its community citizens.

The issue of illiteracy in Ohio and the United States has reached a stage of critical importance to many citizens. The public library can now take a leadership role in promoting the issue of illiteracy in the local community. Librarians should be at the forefront of promoting reading in the community and addressing the need to improve literacy skills.

Bibliography

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Note: There are excellent bibliographies prepared by literacy centers such as Project LEARN in Cleveland. Other libraries and literacy centers and coalitions may also have bibliographies available for reference in your area.

Books and lists of articles provided by the ERIC Database Dialog are also available at most public libraries or through interlibrary loan.

Appendix I

Beginning Checklist

1. Contact the State Library for consultant information. ☐
2. Establish a literacy resource center. ☐
3. Cooperate with an existing literacy center. ☐
4. Examine the community. ☐
5. Seek funding. ☐
6. Marshal the community as needed. ☐
7. Select the program. ☐
8. Implement the program. ☐
9. Review and evaluate the program. ☐
10. Seek additional funding as needed. ☐

Appendix II

Sources for Literacy Information

Laubach Literacy Action
1320 Jamesville Ave.
Box 131
Syracuse, New York 13210

Literacy Volunteers of America
404 Oak St.
Syracuse, New York 13203

Ohio Department of Education
Office of Adult and Community Education
65 S. Front St.
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0308

Project LEARN (Books for Adult New Readers Bibliography)
2238 Euclid Ave.
Cleveland, Ohio 44115

The State Library of Ohio
Library Development Office
65 S. Front St.
Columbus, Ohio 43266-0334

Ohio Literacy Network
P.O. Box 292542
Columbus, Ohio 43229

NOTES

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